

"You motherfucker," she hissed.

The car-port bell chimed. Through the speaker a male voice said, "I'll take one a those there in the window."

Ellis put one hand on Amber's hat and another on the bottoms of her shoes and gave her a final push. When her neck cleared the window, she unfolded, snapping out straight, and slid head-first into the open window of the car that had just pulled up. Ellis leaned on the counter and called out, "That'll be twelve ninety-five, guy; ya want some fries to go with that?" The driver said, "Nope," handed Ellis a twenty and drove away without his change.

### THE THIRD NIGHT ON THE JOB (BYE-YA)

Ellis Leahy, night manager, sat at his desk in the office in the back and counted the money while his crew scoured the grill and strained the deep fryers and wiped the counters and mopped the floor. Then Kim appeared in the doorway, her thick black hair let loose from her cap, a fine sheen of sweat and cooking grease shining on her face. "We're all done, Mr. Night Manager Sir," she sing-songed. "Can we go?"

Ellis turned from his stacks of fives and tens and twenties to look at her. She was nineteen years old, dark-haired, dark-eyed, plump and beautiful. She reminded him of his wife Ruth when Ruth was a girl. Kim saw the appreciation of her beauty in his eyes and plopped down in his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and said, "Place is all clean, boss." Then she grabbed the hair on the back of his head with one hand and ground her lips into his so hard that their teeth — her teeth, his partial — clashed. When she released him he stood to dump her off his lap and growled, "Get the hell outa here," wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Her eyes darted to his crotch and the bulge of the incipient erection and she smiled and said, "Bye-ya."

Ellis sat back down and rubbed his eyes as the crew jostled out the back door. When they were gone, the place silent, he pulled the bank deposit bag from the desk drawer and began paper-clipping the like denomination bills together, and he noticed that the twenties were gone.

### IN THE WEE SMALL HOURS

Ellis Leahy wrote down Kim Rubio's address from her employee file and locked the restaurant and hopped into his



car. He was going after her. She'd run off with more money than he could comfortably replace, and he wanted it back.

The address was in Loma Alta's Eastside — a graffiti-squiggled, bullet-riddled barrio. The landscape of her apartment building was bare dirt dotted with randomly-placed grey-green tumbleweeds. The spray paint on the front wall said "THE EASTSIDE LOCOS." The music from the courtyard pounded hard, detectable on a Richter Scale.

Ellis slammed his car door and walked into the complex. The music — rap, the deep-voiced male using the word 'fuck' and its derivatives generously — blasted from inside Number 7, Kim's place. Ellis walked past the emerald-green swimming pool. A wine bottle floated on the water's surface, bobbing in the small wavelets caused by the seismic effect of the electronic drumbeat. Ellis stepped inside the apartment. A dozen people — Kim and two of his closers among them — sat cross-legged around four cases of imported beer. Kim grinned and raised her beer to him. He crossed the room and bent over and grabbed her arm and screamed, "I WANT MY MONEY BACK." She couldn't hear him. She shook her head and said something he couldn't hear either and he grabbed her forearm and pulled her roughly to her feet.

A small African-American man with lightning bolts etched into the short hair on the sides of his head appeared out of thin air (it seemed) between them, facing Ellis and holding the cold metal cylinder of the barrel of a small-caliber hand-gun to the point of the night manager's chin. He backed Ellis out the door and over to the pool and in. Ellis remained submerged as six bullets blasted into the water's surface and swooped and swerved — their trajectories altered by the relatively high-viscosity fluid — over and under and around him as if guided by the hand of God himself. When the bullets, and the air bubbles they had forced into the water, were gone, Ellis surfaced like a crocodile — eyes and nostrils to the atmosphere. The black man was gone, and Kim Rubio sat on the edge of the pool, her Burger 'N' Run jeans rolled up to her knees and her legs dangling in the water. She smiled, a black-eyed angel, and holding up a bottle of the beer she said, "Hey Mr. Night Manager, you want a cold one?"

#### LAWN MAINTENANCE BLUES

Steve's game is lawn maintenance, mows and edges lawns for a couple of dozen folks in one of the rich neighborhoods in the foothills behind Loma Alta, where he met Elena, a pretty black-eyed Mexican girl, a live-in maid for one of